DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 027 UD 032 269

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TITLE The Best Teachers in Low Income, Urban Schools: How Do They Maintain Their Enthusiasm and Excellence?
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Ethnography in Education Forum (Philadelphia, PA, March 5-7, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Low Income Groups; Poverty; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Effectiveness; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

The thoughts of 25 highly experienced and exemplary urban teachers from low-income schools about teaching were studied. A survey method was used to examine how they maintained their enthusiasm and excellence in teaching, the effects of the low-income school and community on their instruction, and the skills and attitudes they recommended for new urban teachers. Results indicated that teachers' personal qualities, such as their sense of efficacy with children, their pride at being teachers, and their care for children, are more meaningful to them than their professional memberships and activities. Contrary to expectations, these teachers were not political in their thoughts about education, and they did not display qualities normally associated with the cultural responsiveness that has been so important in recent literature. The results of the study are discussed as to whether the data source is representative of other exemplary urban teachers. Teachers' sensitivity to the political and cultural dimensions of teaching may be partly influenced by the size of the city in which they teach. (Contains 2 tables and 12 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Best Teachers in Low Income, Urban Schools: How Do They Maintain Their Enthusiasm and Excellence?

The Ethnography in Education Forum

Center for Urban Ethnography

University of Pennsylvania

3700 Walnut Street

Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216

March 5-7, 1998

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Abstract

We investigated the thoughts of 25 highly experienced and exemplary urban teachers from low-income schools. Using a survey method we examined how they maintained their enthusiasm and excellence in teaching, the effects of the low-income school and community on their instruction, and the skills and attitudes they recommended for new urban teachers. Results indicated that teachers' personal qualities, such as their sense of efficacy with children, their pride at being teachers, and their care for children, are more meaningful to them than their professional memberships and activities. Unexpectedly, these teachers were not political in their thoughts about education, and they did not display qualities normally associated with cultural responsiveness which has been so important in recent literature. The results of this study are discussed as to whether our data source is representative of other exemplary urban teachers — teachers' sensitivity to the political and cultural dimensions of teaching may be partly influenced by the size of the city in which they teach.

Introduction and Purpose

Low income urban schools present teachers with challenges that are not found in higher income districts. Insufficient classroom resources, difficulties with building maintenance, and cultural differences between faculty and children are just a few of their many challenges. More often than not, teachers in these urban buildings lose their energy and commitment to children, and eventually transfer to more privileged schools. Yet some highly effective teachers remain, and these are the ones we investigated in this study.

There are many well-known narratives of masterful teachers spending their entire careers with children of poverty, and their stories illustrate how teachers can make a difference in children's lives. Collins (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982) described how a traditional curriculum combined with high expectations for learning produced extraordinary achievements from Chicago's poorest children. Low income Latino students excelled on nationwide mathematics examinations because of Escalente's (Mathews, 1988) innovative pedagogy and high expectations for student learning. Clark's (Clark & Picard, 1989) personal beliefs and energies dramatically improved student attendance and conduct at Paterson's Eastside High, an inner-city school previously known for its disorder.

In this paper we investigated the thoughts of highly effective, urban teachers from low-income schools. Specifically we examined the following questions:

- How do highly effective and experienced teachers in high-poverty, urban schools maintain their excellence and enthusiasm to teach?

- What skills and attitudes do highly effective and experienced teachers recommend as most important for new teachers to acquire?
- How do high poverty communities, schools, and children influence their teaching?

Literature Review

Two strands of research examine the qualities of highly effective teachers. The first pertains to the personal qualities and characteristics of exemplary teachers without regard to the context in which they teach. The second strand is context specific and examines the attributes of effective teachers in urban schools.

The most exhaustive review of research about exemplary teachers is by Collinson (1994). She summarizes that body of work by identifying three personal attributes that repeatedly appear in the research literature: (1) Exemplary teachers exhibit a love for continuous learning, (2) they have an ethic of care for children and (3) they have a love for teaching. In addition, they are seen as creative, enthusiastic, and intellectually curious with positive attitudes about themselves and their students.

A sense of self-efficacy has recently been identified as the reason why some teachers are more effective than others. Chester & Beaudin (1996) and Riehl & Sipple (1996) are two recent examples of research in which this sense of accomplish and efficacy have been shown to characterize highly effective teaches. Effective teachers in these studies viewed their classrooms as homes away from home and they derived personal satisfaction from children's learning.

A second strand of research examines the attributes of effective teachers in

urban settings. The assumption of this research is that urban teaching makes unique demands on classroom practitioners and these qualities are often not found in mainstream settings. Haberman (1995) and Weiner (1993) explain a teacher's personal qualities account for most of his/her effectiveness with low income children (Haberman, 1995; Weiner,1993). They explain that effective urban teachers have empathy and enthusiasm, an eagerness to teach the disadvantaged, a willingness to learn children's cultural backgrounds, energy to motivate, an awareness of their personal biases and prejudices, and hold high expectations for all students' learning.

Haberman (1995) goes another step further by claiming that 80% of effective teaching of urban children lies within the teachers' personal characteristics. The implications of his work are that teacher education programs should carefully screen prospective teachers for these qualities as a condition of acceptance into urban education programs -- the candidate selection process is more important than teacher training. Haberman recommends that teachers of the urban poor be selected from an older population (above 30 years of age), who have a proven ability of establishing rapport with low-income children, and that practicing teachers should be part of the selection process. Using over 25 years of experience studying urban schools, Haberman developed a series of categories for interviewing and selecting teachers. His categories pertain to teachers who are adept at handling school bureaucracies, have high expectations for all children's learning, network with other "star" teachers, persist in situations characterized by violence and death, are predisposed to engage in coaching instead of teaching, and focus on student effort more than ability.

A subset of this research has addressed the importance of developing new teachers' cultural awareness and connections in urban communities. They argue that cultural responsiveness and community connectedness, as well as self-efficacy and networking are essential qualities of effective urban teachers (Dyson, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Exemplary urban teachers often participate in community events, are knowledgeable of the culture, and view themselves as community members.

Dyson (1997) found connectedness, self-efficacy, and networking to be closely associated with effective teachers of children of poverty. Using Oakland, CA. as the site of her study, Dyson conducted biweekly seminars over the course of a year with ten highly experienced urban elementary teachers. Their average classroom experience was 20 years. Dyson's experienced teachers identified three reasons why they remained in teaching at their high-poverty schools. One, these teachers felt a sense of connection with their children and their communities. Dyson's teachers had a sense of knowing and respecting the culture of the community where they taught. Two, Dyson's teachers felt a sense of influence for making a difference in children's lives; this relates to a similar sense of efficacy recently identified by others, such as Chester and Beaudin (1996) and Riehl and Sipple (1996). These effective teachers viewed their classrooms as homes away from home and their satisfaction generated from children's learning. Three, they obtained encouragement and inspiration from interaction with peers in their building. Dyson's ten teachers felt valued and supported by their colleagues -- they believed their voices mattered in their school communities.

Some of Dyson's discoveries concur with those of Haberman and Weiner. Good

teaching in low-income urban schools "requires maximum flexibility and creativity, maximum reaching out to children, parents, and colleagues....reaching out to new possibilities for growth -- and finding possibilities amidst institutional constraints" (Dyson, 1997, p. 145).

Knapp (1995) studied 140 experienced teachers in high poverty schools. The schools he selected were chosen because of their "better-than-average" performance on conventional measures, and his teachers were identified as highly experienced. Of these teachers he found one-third used conventional basic-skill kind of instruction, but he found another third placed advanced thinking skills (teaching for meaning) in the center of their instruction. Effective teachers in these high poverty schools placed consistent and sustained emphasis on alternatives to conventional skill instruction in math, writing, and reading. Knapp explains that teacher effectiveness is determined in part by the interaction of state, district, and building policies regarding instruction and assessment; as well as by factors within a building that can buffer and sustain teacher autonomy and effectiveness at teaching (e.g, mentor teachers, effective principals, etc). A delicate balance, he argues, must be struck between professional support, autonomy, and pressure to change teaching practice.

Method

Our interest in this study was generated from our combined 75 years experience in urban education and a recent edition of the English Record (1996, vol 85, #5) which contained a themed collection of articles about seasoned teachers' professional renewal and enthusiasm for the classroom. We believed it would be interesting to

examine the thoughts of the best teachers with whom we collaborated as to how they maintained their enthusiasm and commitment to teach.

Questionnaire

We constructed a questionnaire to survey effective urban teachers. Feimen-Neisser & Floden's (1986) review article in AERA's Handbook of Research on Teaching served as a rich source of information for that questionnaire. In addition, Weiner's (1993) review chapter provided us with an overview of characteristics of highly effective urban teachers.

The questionnaire contained 23 Likert items in which respondents answered, on a scale of one to seven, whether they strongly agreed or disagreed with given statements about their teaching careers. The items addressed their pride at being teachers, their sense of efficacy in the classroom, their attitude toward knowledge and learning, their activities for maintaining their professionalism (i.e., attending teacher conferences, reading professional journals, interacting with colleagues) and their participation in extra-curricular school activities. In addition, we used several open-ended questions to further tap teacher thoughts about how they held-up to the daily pressures of teaching in their schools. For example, we asked them to identify the benefits and challenges of teaching in their particular buildings, what they perceived to be the biggest hurdles facing their children, how the characteristics (e.g., urban/rural; wealthy/low-income) and conditions (maintenance and resources) of their school influence their teaching, and what professional attitudes and skills new urban teachers needed to be effective.

Targeted Schools

We identified schools to be low-income if they served free breakfast and lunch to the majority of children, or if they participated in Even Start programs. Teachers from two urban districts provided the data for this. The districts are located in small Northeastern cities with populations of 100,00 and 60,000 people. Teachers in three low-income schools in each district provided the data source.

Teacher Selection

Our concept of effective teachers is similar to Haberman's (1995) "star" teachers. These are the teachers whom principals, supervisors and other teachers and parents view as outstanding.

We used two research strategies for selecting elementary teachers for the study. The first consisted of our own identification of highly effective teachers in buildings where we supervised practica and student teachers. We believed our combined personal experience in urban education qualified us to identify teachers of excellence. When two of us agreed to the identification of a teacher, we asked that individual to complete the questionnaire. When we were unable to identify effective teachers in a particular building we relied on a second method: two informants from those buildings were asked to identify highly effective teachers for us. We knew teachers in the larger district less well than the smaller one, and consequently we asked the district's curriculum coordinator and one teacher from each building to independently compose lists of highly effective teachers for us. Where the lists agreed, those teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire for us. We had worked with the informant teachers

and curriculum coordinator in the past and trusted their judgement.

Academic tensions exist between teaching models and are well known (ie., skill-based versus holistic, progressive versus traditional, etc.), but we did not want teachers' allegiance to a particular model to necessarily exclude or include them from the selection process. Our final list consisted of teachers from whole language, basal, and hands-on models of teaching and learning. What was in common was that the final group represented teachers who were perceived by others to be exemplary.

Twenty-five questionnaires served as our data source. The questionnaires were hand-delivered to teachers and then returned to us in the mail with a 90% completion rate. All of these teachers had extensive classroom experience. Nearly two thirds of them completed 11 years of classroom experience. Table 1 Illustrates the number of years of classroom teaching experience for the respondents in this study.

Table 1: Classroom Experience of the 25 Respondents in Study

Number of Teachers	***Years Experience***
5	3-5 years teaching experience
5	6-10 years teaching experience
3	11-15 years teaching experience
4	16-20 years teaching experience
8	21+ years teaching experience

A curious sidebar from the study was that we sometimes found it difficult to corroborate the names of truly outstanding teachers. Although we understood and agreed with our own selections, when we relied on the outside informants only half of their lists concurred. We are unsure why these faculty held different opinions, but we suspect school-based politics, friendships and perhaps their models of teaching unintentionally influenced their identification process. Without being overly cynical, we

further suspect that it is difficult identifying outstanding teachers in some of these buildings; it is widely known that seasoned faculty typically transfer to upper-income schools when opportunities become available. We think it would be interesting to explore the number of teachers in both high-poverty and middle-income districts who are considered by peers to be exemplary.

Data Analysis

We prepared frequency rankings for each of the Likert items. Those items in which two thirds of the teachers strongly agreed or disagreed, as indicated by their marking the extremes of our 7-point Likert scale (6 or 7 or a 1 or 2), are discussed in this paper.

We analyzed the open-ended items through categorization. That is, after reading each of these items, we categorized teachers' responses according to categories that emerged in the responses, e.g., creativity, parental support, self-esteem, and so on.

Results

Frequency Rankings

Twenty-five highly effective teachers completed the questionnaire, and the results of their frequency rankings are illustrated in Table 2. The two highest ranking items are those in which 92% of the teachers highly agreed: (Item #13) "Teaching is a caring activity" and (Item #23) "Teaching is a creative activity." Nearly equal in frequency rankings (88%) were the following questionnaire items: (#3) " I am proud of my decision to be a teacher;" (#19) and "Knowledge is fluid and constructed in part through interaction with my students." Also high in rankings (80%, 84%, and 80%

respectively) were the following items: (Items #6, #21, #22) "Teaching is an intellectual activity," "I believe I make a great difference in children's learning," and "I encourage students to learn collaboratively."

Insert Table 2 about here

Other items where the respondents agreed strongly were the following: (Item #5) "I believe I make a difference in my school community (64%)," (Item #9) "I am passionate about my subject matter (72%)," (Item #10) "I try to collaborate regularly with other teachers in my building (64%)," (Item #17) "Teaching is a skilled activity (76%)," and (Item #18) " I am involved in extracurricular school activities (76%)."

On five items the respondents' rankings fell in the middle of the Likert scale, indicating an absence of agreement or disagreement. Those items were the following: (Item #4) "I read professional journals regularly (56%)," (Item #12) "I interact regularly with the neighborhood community where I teach (52%)," (Item #15) "Knowledge is fixed and well represented in our schools' textbooks (64%), (Item #24) "I find parents helpful and supportive of my teaching (60%)," and (Item #25) "I periodically ask for change in classroom grade assignments."

Responses to three items were skewed toward agreement. Sixty percent (60%) of the teachers strongly agreed that, "Each year I attend a professional conference outside my district (Item #16). Forty-four percent (44%) of the teachers agreed that, "I interact frequently with novice teachers (Item #11). And 52% of the respondents

strongly agreed to: "I interact frequently with colleagues outside my building and receive professional support and stimulation from them (Item # 20)".

More teachers disagreed than agreed to the items pertaining to their membership in professional organizations and whether they viewed teaching as a political activity. Forty-eight (48%) of the teachers indicated strong disagreement with the statement, "I am a member of a non-union professional teaching organization (Item #7)." Eighty (80%) of the teacher's rankings indicated strong disagreement or a lack of a point of view (rankings in the middle of the Likert scale) about the politics of teaching: "Teaching is a political activity (Item #8)."

Answers to Open Ended Items

Although the urban teachers' responses to the open-ended questions sounded by-and-large like those of any good teacher, they also argued that teaching is difficult to learn and to continue to do well. The most often used words in responding to the five open-ended questions were "flexibility" and "firmness", closely followed by advice to new teachers to learn hundreds of techniques to teach reading and to have ever expanding knowledge of children's literature. The latter two issues are readily taught in teacher preparation programs, but the combination of flexibility and firmness is more difficult to teach and to learn. Several of the teachers also spoke about the need for subject matter knowledge, and a couple were eloquent about appreciating children's cultures and avoiding value pre-judgments.

In response to the question about how the characteristics of the community and school influenced their teaching, most of the teachers said they purchased many books

for their classrooms, and several spoke of painting their rooms and adding attractive posters and displays. Our experience is that, except in the most wealthy school districts, good teachers tend to provide a lot of their own materials, partly just because of personal preference or interests. A couple of the respondents commented on the degree of vandalism and losses to thieves in their schools. Many of these teachers also talked of the need for providing wider experiences for their students, whether through books or field trips. Few mentioned bringing other people into their classrooms for enrichment. However, most of the teachers commented on the need for parental help and communication, and for teachers to reach out in positive ways to parents and the community at large.

Teacher comments were surprisingly negative about students' language. Numerous teachers said that the children were deficient in language or lacked skills for verbalizing and communicating. Only one teacher said s/he needed to learn about cultural styles of speaking. Teachers' views about children's language reflect an implicit denigration of the cultures in which they work. This was despite the overall positive nature of the teachers' other open responses, including strong statements about not judging intelligence or potential from socio-economic status of students and their parents.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn how highly effective urban teachers maintained their enthusiasm and excellence for teaching, how school and community cultures influenced their teaching, and which skills and attitudes they recommended

incoming teachers know. Many of our findings were expected but some surprised us.

Teachers in this study represented a highly experienced and respected group, and they revealed many similarities to the teachers studied by Collinson (1994) and Haberman (1995). They revealed an ethic of care for children and a love for the creative and intellectual aspects of teaching. They are especially proud of their decision to become teachers and are active in extracurricular activities. The teachers revealed a constructivist point of view in that they felt knowledge was fluid and socially constructed; they encouraged student collaboration rather than competition. They held a sense of personal efficacy, that is, they felt they made a difference in children's lives and they had impact in their school communities. There was a tendency to collaborate with other teachers in their buildings and they felt "passionate" about their subject matter.

Some of their answers discomfited us. These teachers did not see teaching as a political activity, and they did not necessarily participate in professional organizations or routinely read professional journals. Particularly surprising was the finding that they did not participate in community activities or celebrate parent participation in their classrooms both of which are highly support in other research literature (Dyson, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

We anticipated that the political nature of teaching would be evident to all the teachers in the study. Inadequacies in school funding, segregated schooling, inadequate classroom supplies, as well as despair and hopelessness in the communities must influence children's performance in school -- but these teachers did

not see it so. The size of their cities may have influenced their views about the political nature of teaching -- people in larger cities may be more politically and culturally aware and conscious than teachers in smaller cities. Perhaps people in small northeastern cities are more conservative in their views about teaching than teachers in large cities like San Francisco. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of the larger cities may foster greater cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Some of their answers were paradoxical. That is, on one hand they recommended that new teachers be flexible and receptive, but on the other hand they be firm and structured. We suspect these seemingly contradictory points of view reflect the many pressures of classroom teaching. Highly effective teachers know when to be flexible or structured, and they can give and take depending upon children's behavioral needs. Several years ago business management literature argued that effective managers do not simply have one management style but are able to change styles to fit the needs of their employees, giving some more freedom and others more structure. We suspect that classroom teaching is similar to business management in that effective teachers adjust their classroom management to fit the ever changing needs of children — they can give and take structure as needed.

Teachers' personal qualities are more meaningful than their professional activities and memberships. Their pride at being teachers, their strong sense of efficacy with children and influence in their buildings contributes to their effectiveness and longevity in teaching. Their beliefs that teaching is a caring and creative activity adds to their overall sense of productivity in these high poverty schools. These teachers

identified more with children and colleagues in their buildings but not with outside professional organizations and community activities.

Issues that were not mentioned by these effective teachers particularly interested us. We did not find any discussion of the importance of new teachers learning about children's cultural backgrounds or connectedness to children's communities. Although there were many indications that they related their classroom teaching to children's lives, the teachers did not specify community relationships as a reason why they remained in these buildings — this does not fit with the findings of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Dyson (1997). Although these teachers revealed a strong ethic of care for children and they felt a sense of accomplishment when teaching and interacting in their buildings, they did not reach out to the neighborhood to learn more about children's cultural lives.

We suspect the differences in our findings from that of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Dyson (1997) are due to our data source. Our own perspectives and that of other teachers in the high poverty schools guided teacher selection for this study. But Ladson-Billings used community input in selecting her exemplary teachers, and Dyson had used a very small and highly selective group of teachers with whom she worked over the course of one year — their teachers may be at a higher level of excellence than the ones in our study. Our sample, might reflect a conservative, status-quo point of view about urban education.

Other evidence in our data further supports our thoughts that our teacher sample may be less exemplary than Ladson-Billings' teachers. Our sample's responses to the

open ended items displayed a concern about children's language with many perceiving their language as defective. This astounded us and needs to be explored further.

There are two other concerns about our data source. With the exception of one, all our teachers were white and of European descent. The whiteness of our data may further explain the conservativeness of their answers (e.g., non-political, deficit views about children's language, and little interest in community or cultural activities). Our sample is drawn from two small Northeastern cities, but Ladson-Billings and Dyson used teachers from San Francisco which is far larger and more diverse in its ethnic composition.

We have another concern about the teacher selection component of this study. When we identified highly effective teachers, we developed a list of five teachers from each of the buildings; this represented about 10% of each school's faculty. However, when we relied on outside informants, even ones we highly trusted, their lists were twice as large and contained more than 20% of the faculty in their buildings. We would like to explore this issue further because we suspect classroom teachers and college faculty differ in their criteria for effective teaching.

We know there is a developmental process in learning to become an effective teacher. It is well-known, for example, that beginning teachers are often concerned about classroom management and lesson planning; perhaps concerns about culturally relevant forms of teaching come much later in their careers and were not elicited from our sample.

Finally, we disagree with Haberman's recommendation that "Star Teachers" only

be selected from a pool of people at the age of 30 or older. Our data and experience suggests that teachers can be highly effective at a much younger age. In fact, age has less to with effective teaching than the personal qualities of teachers. A love of teaching and belief in children are more important than age of a teacher candidate. We plan to expand our list of effective teachers to further explore the preceding issues.

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Table 2: Expert Teachers' Answers to Questionnaire Items

Questionnaire Item	Percent who strongly disagreed	Percent in the middle.	Percent who strongly agreed.
3. I am proud of my decision to be a teacher.	8%	4%	88%
4. I read professional journals regularly.		56%	44%
5. I believe I make a great difference in my school community.		36%	64%
6. Teaching is an intellectual activity		20%	80%
7. I am a member of a non-union, professional teaching organization.	48%	12%	40%
8. Teaching is a political activity.	32%	48%	20%
9. I am passionate about my subject matter.	12%	16%	72%
10. I try to collaborate regularly with other teachers in my building.	8%	28%	64%
11. I interact frequently with novice teachers.	8%	48%	44%
12. I interact regularly within the neighborhood/community where I teach.	8%	52%	40%
13. Teaching is a caring activity.	8%		92%
14. I use competition to foster student learning.	40%	40%	20%
15. Knowledge is fixed and well represented in our school textbooks.	28%	64%	8%

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16. Each year I attend a professional conference outside of my district.	20%	20%	60%
17. Teaching is a skilled activity.	8%	16%	76%
18. I am involved in extracurricular school activities.	4%	20%	76%
19. Knowledge is fluid and constructed in part through interaction with my students	4%	8%	88%
20.I interact frequently with colleagues outside my building and receive professional support and stimulation from them.		48%	52%
21. I believe I make a great difference in children's learning.	4%	16%	80%
22. I encourage students to learn collaboratively.	4%	12%	84%
23. Teaching is a creative activity.	4%	4%	92%
24. I find parents helpful and supportive of my teaching.	4%	60%	36%
25. I periodically ask for change in classroom grade assignments.	20%	56%	24%

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